

DISCOVERING SELF, CHRIST, AND OTHERS

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Introduction

In directing our whole life to God, we establish an intimate relationship with Him, an open and personal friendship. Living the Christian life fulfills all the criteria of the authentic ideal – living the life of grace. Our hearts are filled with the life of Christ in us by our piety. All of life speaks to our intellects as a gift from God, by our study. And we share our lives with others as we put our will into action.

Cursillos of Christianity presents us with a different concept of study from what we are used to. To most people, when they hear the word ‘study’, they immediately relate it to its academic aspect. Cursillo presents the concept of study in a new dimension. Cursillo defines Christian study as a progressive search for the meaning of life itself, the most basic question of humanity.

We are called to perfection, in the image and likeness of God. Study is an important part of developing ourselves as a person and of understanding what a human being is, and what our life is. All persons study. What they study is governed by their ideal. Study is a natural quality of the human being, and we should study to live efficiently and productively.

Thus:

- an industrial plant employee studies the working conditions, debates about unions and wages.
- a person interested in sports practically memorizes their hero’s statistics and accomplishments.
- a mother is interested in her children’s needs, wants and patterns of behavior.
- a Cursillista studies how the person is affected by their environment, their circumstances, etc.

Any time a person decides to do something in a better way, studying is an integral part of that endeavor.

Study can offer us, through more and better information, a greater formation, that is, – a Christian form – which will reform our mentality to adapt our life to God’s plan, and to transform everything around us, while animating everything with a Christian spirit.

Study calls for the person to be open:

- to **God**, to know when He speaks and what He is telling us;
- to **ourselves**, to know ourselves better and bring about a constant interior renewal;
- to **others**, to know and love our brothers and sisters as the image and likeness of Christ.

Studying is more than just reading books or going to school. Books are the expressions of authors on what they have observed and learned. Life is the great teaching tool that we

all have; it is the book in which the wisdom of God, its creator, has left His imprint for us to study.

If we claim that God is our ideal, then His way, His truth, His life must be the subject of our study. Even though some people may go through life with little or no interest in the things of God, He calls us to walk with Him and to see our potential.

God calls us to grasp the perfect ideal, one without ending, yet within reach, for Jesus said *“You must be perfect – just as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (Mt. 5:48). Our relationship with God must be the decisive factor in our lives, and so everybody is called to deepen their understanding of God and everybody must learn according to their God-given potential and talent; to become perfect as the Father calls us to be (Eph. 4:24 – *“...and you must put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy.”*)

Study is putting our minds at the service of the truth or applying our minds to learn the truth. In essence, it is the process of learning to love and respond in faith to reach our potential as persons; fully human and fully Christian. Only by fulfilling our potential can we begin to understand God's love for us, and begin to live in that love.

The Need to Study

To become the person we are called to be is a life-long effort. Although most people in life do not reach their potential, there are a few who have; we call them saints. Every one of us is called to a life of holiness. Christ's demands for our time and energy are not just something extra we are to do, but this effort must be intrinsic to our lives.

The inner nature of our intellect causes us to study. Our intellect must be exercised to become proficient. Mankind's progress depends on study. God involves humanity in the creative process. So, God demands that we develop our natural potential (Mt. 25:14-30, Parable of the Talents). Thus our very vocations in life demand study and knowledge.

We all have talents that can be developed. God created us to share His life with us, but we have to extend ourselves to reach this goal. We cannot afford to sit around and do nothing; otherwise we will be like the servant who hid his talents so that they wouldn't get lost. However, we have a choice – and we can make the right choice through our God-given intellect, freedom and a free will.

Our Christian vocation gives us an added obligation to study. As a result of our baptism into Christ, we face our greatest challenge. We have to search for and discover who God is and who we are. Even Jesus, for His part, *“grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favor with God and men”* (Lk. 2:52). For our part, Jesus proclaimed: *“And eternal life means to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent”* (Jn. 17:3).

Through lack of study, people may have rejected God (cf. Jn. 16:3). For us, to grow in knowledge of God requires that we search (cf. Mt. 11:27). Christ assures us that our

search will be fruitful and worthwhile, for He asked the Father that He reveal the truth to His disciples. But truth is never revealed to us unless we are open to it (cf. Jn. 17:7, 26) and once we receive it, the truth makes us free (Jn. 8:32) – free to be the person God created us to be.

So, living in grace requires that we grow in knowledge of God and ourselves. Grace is friendship with God. Friendship with someone is impossible without knowing the person. If we are to be God's friends, we must make as much effort to know Him as we do to know things that are of vital interest to us in this world.

We cannot be satisfied with a childhood or teenage level knowledge of God; we must continually advance in knowledge of God and of ourselves if we are to live in friendship with God. The knowledge that promotes friendship is a routine of life, and not just facts or things we recount and perhaps recite in an occasional vocal prayer. Our knowledge of God and his creation must come from our living union with Him. Therefore, spending time with God and listening to Him, which is what prayer is really about, is essential in sustaining that friendship.

This type of knowledge does not happen overnight, nor can it be taught from a book or at school. This knowledge and this friendship evolve from living our life in union with the Father in Christ. It is part of a progressive conversion that occurs in time. It is part of our daily metanoia that we must undergo. It is part of becoming a Christian, part of becoming holy, part of becoming a person.

Study is necessary in our search for the answer to life's deepest questions: Who am I? What am I doing? Where am I going? What is truth? Only through God can we find meaningful answers to these questions (cf. Jn. 17:8). The object of our study is centered, condensed, and synthesized in the words of St. Augustine: "*Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know You.*" Knowing God and knowing ourselves will lead us to know others, to become fully involved with our world, to read the signs of the times, to face our society and to filter the Christian influence into our environments!

"To be Christian is not a project that is realized, but a realization that is projected. It is not an event of life, but making life a continuous and amazing event." (Eduardo Bonnín)

If we love our brothers and sisters in Christ – and we must if we claim to love God – then we will have a commitment to them. We will feel more and more that each person is made in God's image. We will recognize that each person, like us, is searching for meaning, for happiness, for truth. Christianity can offer the totality of truth – Jesus Christ.

If we are to gain eternal life, then we must know God (Jn. 17:3) and to know Him takes time, time to learn and grow into what God created for us (Study). And, if we are to love our brothers and sisters, then our desire will be to bring them into a relationship with Christ through love and friendship in our apostolic action.

Our daily progressive conversion results in a deepening union with God, moving from Piety, to Study to Action, and back to Piety – a complete circle.

The Purpose of Study

The purpose of study is not simply to obtain knowledge, but to enable the person to be a true Christian, not just the one who does Christian things.

We are called to be saints - to create a radical change in the fabric of our mentality, to unite ourselves with God Himself, to let His concerns become our concerns, to let our spirits soar to reach the possibilities of our life, to fulfill the promise implied in our created likeness of God.

Study is an extension of Piety, becoming that phase of Piety wherein we discern to discover the path of God for us, allowing us to put on the mind of Christ, the mind of the Church. Like Christ, we must grow in wisdom (Lk. 2:52).

Holiness consists of a continuous conversion of self. *“This kingdom and this salvation . . . are available to every human being as grace and mercy . . . but above all, each individual gains them through a total interior renewal which the Gospel calls metanoia, a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart”* (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* #10).

Where do we discern the truth – why do we study?

If we are to become perfect, just as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48), then study in the sense we are talking about is not the same as the study a non-Christian might undertake. A non-Christian might undertake to learn all there is to learn about Christianity, the Church, its history, etc., but not about being Christian.

Christian study is more than an intellectual pursuit. It is the search for the truth, learning to discern the way of God through His creation. Christian study includes intellectual pursuits and search for knowledge, but it goes beyond that – it demands that the Christian take this knowledge and understanding and let it permeate and transform his life on an ongoing basis. *The person I am today should not be the person I am tomorrow.*

God still calls man to seek him, and every person must search for God with his intellect, his will and with ‘an upright heart.’ *“You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”* (St. Augustine).

Scripture and Church Teaching.

We have at our disposal, a special and powerful teacher to advance us in the knowledge which leads to the love of the Lord in all things. We have the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit reveals Himself to us through every facet of creation and provides us with a path to an awareness of God’s presence and loving care that nothing else can surpass.

“God has revealed Himself to us through His word, the Scriptures, in a way that no other method brings. Scripture must be a large part of our Christian study, our search, and discernment of the truth. Scripture is the source of all truth, and must be the backbone of any program of Christian study. The use of Scripture places us face to face with God; He speaks directly into our soul as we meditate and reflect on our life as revealed by the words in Scripture. Scripture must be the anchor around which we build our attitudes and personality” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation #7). St. Jerome says that when we pray, we speak to God; but when we read, God speaks to us.

God continues to speak to us, as the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the world through His. An area where the Spirit speaks to each individual is through formation of conscience. One cannot lie to oneself – at least not for long. A person, who is made aware of his life through daily self-examination in depth, keeps a balance between the awesome beauty of his likeness to God and the humble awareness of how little he responds to His call. Often, self-examination is the key that takes intellectual learning and moves it into the heart, to allow this learning to transform our lives.

“In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can, when necessary, speak to his heart more specifically: do this, avoid that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (Rom. 2:15-16).

God calls man to serve Him in spirit and in truth. However, God has given man the freedom to choose. “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness . . . for its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man be left in the hand of his own counsel so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Therefore, man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from mere external pressure” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World #17).

Lesson from Scripture

Doing a lot of things for Christ does not always mean that we know him or that we have a relationship with him. In Matthew, Chapter 7, we read about the apostles performing mighty deeds. So how could Jesus be disappointed with anyone who seems to be doing exactly what he asks?

Jesus wasn’t trying to scare people away from serving him. He spoke these words so that he could make an important point: In his kingdom, action cannot be separated from obedience. Those who hear his word and act on it are building on a solid foundation, while those who don’t listen to his word have nothing to support them, no matter how magnificent their deeds may be. It’s not that they haven’t done anything — in fact, they may be very busy doing a lot of good things — but they haven’t based their lives on the right foundation.

All this points to the very special way in which Jesus wants us to listen to his word. Jesus didn't rebuke the disciples for not knowing the Scriptures, but for not knowing him (Matthew 7:23).

He wants us to come to him through his word so that our inner lives – the inner self – can be conformed to his likeness. He wants to do so much more in us than teach us the right way to act. He wants to reshape us so that we know the right way to be.

Nature and Human Relationships

Pope John Paul II, in the “Splendor of Truth”, writes: “The Splendor of Truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator, and in a special way in man, created in the image and likeness of God. Truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord.”

Being in God's image makes the individual a person a “someone” and not a “something.” He is capable of self-knowledge and of having friendships with other persons. He is called into a Covenant with God and can make a response of love not known by any other creature.

Therese of Lisieux experienced God's love through the beauty of nature and human relationships. God used all of these to reveal His own beauty to Therese from an early age. Therese learned that life on earth is passing, heaven is eternal; this has consequences for how we believe and make choices now.

But it wasn't just nature that called forth a longing for the eternal, heaven, in Therese; it was also the love and affection she found in human relationships. She had a deep love for her family. She knew that the “soil” she was planted in was ideal for knowing the love of God the Father.

Like Therese, there's much we can learn from human friendship and love that can help us in understanding and living our relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Therese is a great example of how the saints are living, experiencing and teaching what is revealed to us in Scriptures, but which we seldom fathom in its depth of insight or present applicability.

“Our very nature requires us to be interested in others. When there is something beautiful within us, we desire to communicate to others. When we see others who are worse off than we are, we desire to help them with something of ours. This need is original - natural that is within us before we are conscious of it. Serving others satisfies this need.

We become ourselves to the extent that we live this need and this requirement. Communicating to others gives us the experience of completing ourselves. This is so true that, if we are not able to give, we experience ourselves as incomplete beings.

To be interested in others, to communicate to others, enables us to fulfill the supreme and, indeed, the only task in life: to become ourselves, to complete ourselves. But it is Christ who has enabled us to understand the ultimate reason for this, revealing the ultimate law of being and of life: charity. The supreme law of our being is to share in the being of others, to live in communion.” (Magnificat – Msgr. Luigi Giussani)

Books, Magazines, etc . . .

Books, magazines, Christian formation courses, etc. form the basis of forming a mature attitude towards life, enable us to discuss the way of truth in our life. However, study cannot be an accidental browsing of a Catholic newspaper or book, not even to read a good book, but to read and study the books that will do us the most good at this particular moment in our life as a Christian. To know the book that we need at this particular moment in our life, maybe, should not depend entirely on us, but on the advice of our Spiritual Director, who ought to know us better than we know ourselves.

We should never assume that all Christians are required to read the same books – with the exception of Scriptures, of course. If this were the case, it would overlook the God-given diversity of human personality and its different needs.

Our attitude toward study is not one in pursuit of intellectual satisfaction, but in search for the truth whereby we are ever molded into being Christ’s friend. We cannot be satisfied with mere knowledge; we will need understanding as well. Our goal is friendship through a relationship with Christ, with ourselves and with others.

What Keeps Us from Studying?

False Humility - What keeps so many people from being salt of the earth and light to the world is their erroneous concept of themselves as worth hardly anything – it’s called false humility. So many times we sell ourselves short and proceed on the basis that we really cannot accept the challenge of the authentic ideal of becoming a truly Christian person. Low self esteem is contrary to our belief that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

Self-sufficiency – Been there and done that! My glass is full. There is an element of overconfidence or over-estimating one’s experience and knowledge, often to cover up something they really do not know and are quite unwilling to find out for fear that it means they may have to change. They fail to realize that we can never stop growing or knowing God on a deeper level (Eph. 4:14-15).

Indifference – Who cares! I like who I am and where I am and nothing is going to change me. The unwillingness to let go and allow God to come into their lives. Their mind, heart, and will are immovable. They become like birds in a cage that can flap their wings but are never able to fly.

Materialism – The world moves in a materialistic path; we move with it; and we forget our true purpose in life. More and more we let things become more important than

people. The temptation is to allow ‘temporal goods’ to distract us from creating change in the ‘temporal order’ – our environments.

Pride – This is one obstacle that prevents growth and fulfillment of one’s potential as a person, and allows negative influence in our lives (cf. 1 Tim. 1:5-7). Pride prevents a person from giving up themselves (cf. Mt. 11:25).

In today’s world *failure to prioritize our priorities* has become an obstacle to stay focused on our piety, study, and action. The world offers many distractions that often keep us *too busy* and leave us exhausted therefore, unable to live what is fundamental for being a Christian. “We are no longer able to hear God - there are too many different frequencies filling our ears.” (Pope Benedict XVI)

Perseverance in Study

Be **courageous** and do what is right in spite of the ways and distractions of the world. Be humble and recognize that we are nothing apart from God, but recognize also that God has made us somebody – a person. Exercise **discipline** to form good habits, especially that of study.

Take time to meditate to allow ourselves to be confronted by Divine Revelation – the Word of God – in order to transform our life.

Conclusion

Study is not complete without Piety and Action. Study gives direction and growth to our progressive conversion by helping us to discern the will of God in our lives and reform our mentality in Christ. Our Piety facilitates a living relationship – a true friendship – with the Father in Christ. Our Study facilitates our growth in knowledge of ourselves, of Christ, and of others so as to sustain the three-fold relationship. And our Action facilitates the joyful communication of friendship to those in our environments in order to bring them into that same living relationship – that same true friendship with Christ and one another.

De Colores!